Bipolar disorder in one page

What it is

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a condition where your mood, energy and judgement move in episodes, swinging between highs and lows that go well past ordinary ups and downs. The high is called mania. The low looks like depression, and for most people it takes up far more of life. It is a medical condition and it responds to treatment.

The signs

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder shows up as highs and lows. A high, called mania, brings more energy, less need for sleep, racing thoughts and risky choices, and lasts at least 7 days. A milder, shorter high is hypomania. The lows look like depression.

How a diagnosis happens

How do I get assessed for bipolar?

You start with your GP, who takes the history and writes the referral. Bipolar is usually confirmed by a psychiatrist, either privately on that referral or through your public community mental health service. There is no blood test or scan for it. The assessment is an interview about your life, and the part that decides it is your highs, not your lows.

Treatment

What is interpersonal and social rhythm therapy (IPSRT)?

IPSRT is a talking therapy built for bipolar. It works on your daily routine, especially when you sleep and wake, and on the relationships and life events that knock that routine over. Australia's mood disorders guideline lists it among the psychological treatments with evidence behind them, while noting the trials are few and the findings are mixed.

Medication

Do I need medication for bipolar?

Usually, yes. Australia's mood disorders guideline treats bipolar as a lifelong illness and puts medication at the centre of both settling an episode and preventing the next one. Sleep, routine and talking therapy matter, and on their own they are not usually enough, especially for the highs. The decision is still yours, made with a doctor who knows your full history.

- Medication is the core treatment, especially for highs
- The guideline calls bipolar a lifelong illness
- Therapy and sleep work alongside, not instead

Who diagnoses and who prescribes

Can a GP diagnose bipolar, or do I need a psychiatrist?

No rule says only a psychiatrist can diagnose bipolar. In practice, your GP notices it and refers you, and a psychiatrist makes the full assessment, which Medicare's item 291 pays for.

- A psychiatrist assesses current symptoms and how severe
- A psychiatrist checks other conditions and physical health

What it costs

What does a psychiatrist cost for bipolar?

There is no set price. Psychiatrists set their own fees, and they vary widely between clinics, cities and states. A first appointment is long and costs much more than a review. With a GP referral, Medicare pays a rebate, not the fee, and you pay the gap on the day. Public hospital clinics cost you nothing.

- No set price, each clinic sets its fee
- First appointments cost far more than reviews

In danger? Call 000. Lifeline 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14, or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467. Free counselling by phone or video, any hour.

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